Naval War College Review

Volume 22
Number 2 *February*

Article 2

1969

President's Notes: Challenge!

Richard G. Colbert
U.S. Navy

CHALLENGE!

In recent months there has been some controversy as to whether the Soviet leadership, in the light of the dramatic buildup of its seapower and expanding operations at sea, has now adopted an offensive maritime strategy or retains its traditional defensive strategy at sea. In examining this question, it seems to me that it is essential to recognize one basic principle, i.e., adoption of a particular military strategy must be based on two factors: military capabilities and political intentions. Capabilities are finite, factual; years are required to develop them. Intentions are not measurable in the same sense; they can change overnight.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk once made the statement, in a discussion of NATO's defense posture, that "The pace of political change can move much faster than the lead time needed in the military establishments of NATO."

The recent example of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia illustrates so well the difficulty of estimating intentions. While deployments of military forces toward the Czechoslovakian borders were well known to NATO planners, the political-psychological factors that seemed to weigh against invasion threw off many astute observers. It would appear that the "go" decision was not actually made until the conclusion of a certain critical two-hour meeting in the Kremlin the day before the troops, which had been massed on the Czech borders, suddenly crossed over.

This demonstration of how a major strategic decision can be made overnight has thrown into grave question the whole concept of political warning that NATO has been counting on in implementing its new strategy of flexible response. It has dramatized the inability to "read" intentions. It is a lesson, as old as history, which the Czechoslovakian affair has taught us once again.

Turning to the question of Soviet maritime strategy--whether it is "defensive or containing rather than provoking or aggressive," as one authoritative source has recently declared--again I would point to the fact that capabilities must be the prime factor to be considered. Today, without question, the USSR has developed and continues to expand its capabilities at sea which give her strategic options of wide range. The problem is: How will she use those capabilities, which options will she take?

These options must be looked at both from the viewpoint of a hot war strategy and a cold war strategy. The question of what hot war strategy the Soviet might plan--including possibly one involving the initiation of war at sea--cannot be answered positively anymore than we could have predicted Soviet intentions to move into Czechoslovakia. However, there is little question that her rapidly expanding offensive capabilities at sea certainly offer the option in the future, if not now, of an *offensive* hot war maritime strategy.

Similarly her developing capabilities to project her national power by sea in peacetime give her the option of an *aggressive* cold war maritime strategy. I would describe the strategy currently being followed by Russia in the Mediterranean as such. Here by the combination of massive arms and economic aid to key countries on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, coupled with the deployment of substantial naval forces into the area and protestations of support for the Arab States in opposition to Israel, the USSR has proselytized these states to her orbit of influence. Today, following this strategy, she has established herself as a meaningful power in the Mediterranean area. It is logical that this successful "Mediterranean Strategy" might well be adapted by Moscow to other world sea areas.

Whatever the future holds, the decision to challenge us on the sea in general terms has already been made. Her plan to employ and exploit the concept of the freedom of the seas to her full national advantage is clear. To rival us at sea, the Soviet Union needed maritime strength and she has built this strength both in ships and the expertise to sail those ships. It has taken her some years--but actually an extraordinarily short time, now that we look back upon it--and there was very little the free world could have done to prevent it.

Now it is in large measure up to the free world whether we simply let her continue her dynamic exploitation of her seapower without any response, or whether we take initiatives of our own to counter the challenge it represents. Russia is a proven master at moving into any vacuum of power. She has done so for centuries on land, and doubtless sees no reason why she should not aspire to do so by sea. Of one thing we can be certain: any vacuum the free world leaves behind will probably be filled, and quickly.

The Naval War College mission clearly involves a continuing appraisal in depth of Soviet maritime strategy versus our U.S. and Free World maritime strategy and accurate estimates of our relative maritime capabilities. We need greater understanding of the part that seapower has played in the past and the role it should play in the world today. We need to know how best to use it in the future. We need to examine ways and means whereby cooperative free world naval forces might play a role in answering a challenge of Soviet domination of sea areas such as the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

In addressing this subject, we must recognize that it needs examination in its broadest aspects--considering political, economic and psychological as well as military factors. We must particularly look at Soviet seapower as a tool that Moscow can be expected to use more and more effectively in peacetime in projecting its national power worldwide.

The Naval War College has taken up this challenge and is embarking on an intensive program of research and study in this field. Here, we will hope to bring together all the information and facts bearing on this subject and, for all purposes, create a mosaic which will provide an authoritative, complete and day-to-day picture.

Not least among our objectives is the publication in this magazine and elsewhere of cogent articles bearing upon the subject. In illustration, a number of such are contained in this issue. Within its pages, for example, will be found excerpted writings by Fleet Admiral Sergei G. Gorshkov, the Soviet equivalent of our Chief of Naval Operations, who says bluntly, "Soviet Navymen . . . cannot . . . be satisfied with their Motherland occupying the position of a second-rate seapower." And then, "In the mid 1950's . . . the course taken was one which required the construc-

tion of an oceangoing fleet, capable of carrying out offensive strategic missions."

Also published in this issue is an excellent article by Commander Robert B. Rogers, USN, who was the recipient of the Navy League William S. Sims award for "Outstanding Performance" in the School of Naval Command and Staff at the Naval War College class of 1968. In the abstract of his paper, called *Trends in Soviet Naval Strategy*, Commander Rogers says, "Statements of Soviet strategists, Soviet naval shipbuilding programs, and the ever-broadening areas in which Soviet naval forces operate indicate that the Soviet navy, once assigned only a defensive role, now has an offensive mission. . . . In humiliation, the Soviets learned the true meaning of seapower during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. They intend to turn the tables."

Professor Hartmann of the Naval War College faculty addressed the Newcomen Society in North America at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy last October. His address, a penetrating look at the prelude and postlude of the Czechoslovakian incident of 20-21 August, is carried in full. Likewise, we are printing the complete text of *Naval Strategy in the 20th Century*, Professor Ray O'Connor's address, as a member of last year's faculty, to our Naval Command Course (senior officers of free world navies) last May.

Rear Admiral Henry E. Eccles, whose name is spelled Eklz in the pirated Yugoslavian translation of his book, *Logistics in the National Defense*, has contributed an article titled *Military Theory and Evaluation, the Need for and Nature of;* and Professor Gerald E. Wheeler, who holds the Ernest J. King Chair of Maritime History this year, has written *National Policy Planning Between the World Wars.* Both articles inherently refer to the need for education behind our planning, and, far more specifically, the requirement for understanding of the world at large. But whereas Rear Admiral Eccles talks from deep conviction about the need for theoretical education of the military planner, Wheeler ironically and with equal cogency points out that although "military planners of the 1920's and 1930's felt strongly that the United States was on a collision course with Imperial Japan and later Nazi Germany . . . the man in the street did not feel this way (and) Congress reflected this attitude when it slashed military budgets year after year."

These articles in this issue of the *Naval War College Review* reflect the focus of our concerns and represent an effort to bring these issues to a wider public hearing. To this end, the *Review* and in the larger sense the entire Naval War College--is, and will continue to be, dedicated.

R. G. COLBERT
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy
President, Naval War College

Cover: Castle Hill Lighthouse at the entrance of Narragansett Bay. A familiar navigational aid for a long line of Newport sailors. Photograph courtesy of Captain Paul W. McEntire, JAGC, USN